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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6375

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2945

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000701

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2017

TAGS: PTER ASEC PHUM MO

SUBJECT: MOROCCO TERRORISM: STATE OF "HIGH ALERT,"
MOROCCANS CONDEMNING TERROR, QUESTIONING APPROACH

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Morocco is on a "state of high alert" in the wake of recent terror attacks in Casablanca, said GOM spokesman and Communications Minister Nabil Benabdelah in a press conference on April 18. Responding to recent NGO criticism, the Minister asserted that the GOM would take human rights into consideration in its anti-terror efforts and described terrorism as an "ideological problem" rather than a product of poverty. He also said security forces had arrested the "mastermind" of the March 11 and April 10 incidents. A modest demonstration was staged in Casablanca by a group of Moroccans to condemn the recent terrorist acts and call for a tolerant, multi-cultural society. Others have urged engaging Islamist prisoners in dialogue. We have heard some complaints that the U.S. warden message had "sent the wrong signal" and exaggerated the threat from terror in the country. The GOM's more focused investigations after the latest round of terror incidents stand in contrast with the mass arrests that characterized the government's response to the bombings in 2003. End summary.

GOM on "State of High Alert", Spokesman Rejects Link to Poverty

¶2. (U) Minister of Communication and government spokesman Nabil Benabdelah on April 18 declared Morocco to be under a "high state of alert" following the recent suicide bombings in Casablanca. Benabdelah affirmed that preventative measures are being taken to thwart additional attacks. Specifically, security measures near foreign interests, such as consulates, hotels and religious sites, have been reinforced. Investigations are ongoing and arrested suspects, including the mastermind of the bombings and his assistant, are being interrogated, he said. In reaction to NGOs, worries about possible human rights, abuses during the police investigation into the recent Casablanca bombings, Benabdelah insisted Morocco is committed to respect the detainees' human rights.

¶3. (U) Benabdelah asserted that terrorism is more an ideological and intellectual problem than a social one. The Minister stated that the terrorism phenomenon is not related to poverty and exclusion but rather to an ideological and intellectual deviation from Islam. He contended that there are several extremist trends in Morocco that claim to stem from Islam, but, in fact, have no association with religion. Benabdelah stressed that counterterror efforts require a global approach, including strengthening democracy and social and democratic development.

¶4. (U) The GOM provided more details on April 19 on the latest terror suspects arrested in Casablanca, including that the arrest of the "mastermind" of the March 11 and April 10 incidents was captured in Bouskoura, a southeastern suburb of the city.

Questioning GOM Approach

¶5. (SBU) Meanwhile, government critics and members of the opposition have grown increasingly vocal in their criticism of the GOM's approach to terrorism in the wake of the March-April terrorist incidents. Some have criticized premature pardons for those serving sentences for terrorism. Ahmed Benchamsi, editor of the popular French-language Weekly TelQuel, published a column arguing that Moroccan prisons have become breeding grounds and indoctrination centers for domestic terrorism. Benchamsi asserted that the bomber who detonated himself in an internet cafe on March 11, and many others who had been rounded up in the mass arrests following the May 2003 Casablanca bombings, had not been connected to any violent activities before they entered jail, but later left as hardened and committed jihadists. Abdelhamid Amin, the outspoken President of the Moroccan Human Rights Association, called in an April 17 press conference for the retrial or release of hundreds being held for alleged links to "Al-Salafiya Al-Jihadiya," the catch-all term for those implicated by the GOM in acts of terrorism. Amin asserted that most prisoners held on terror offenses received unfair trials and claimed that the GOM "shattered the record for unfair judgments" in 2006.

RABAT 00000701 002 OF 003

The PJD's Islamic CT Approach

¶6. (SBU) For their part, the Islamic Party of Justice and Development (PJD), called on the government to launch a new effort to combat terrorism that would include opening a dialogue with imprisoned extremists. Senior PJD member Mustafa Ramid (also known for his hardline anti-USG views) told the party newspaper that some imprisoned for extremism could be persuaded to recant their views and renounce violence. Those who do, he contended, should be considered for release. Going further, Ramid slammed GOM "anti-religious" policies and asserted that terrorism could best be combatted by ensuring that Moroccans receive a "correct" Islamic upbringing. (Note: PJD leader Saad Eddin Othmani told the Ambassador on April 17 there was a need to "innoculate" Moroccan youth against terrorist ideology (septel). End note.)

Demonstration Condemns Terror

¶7. (SBU) On April 18, approximately 100 Moroccans gathered under the banner of the "Collective for Democracy and Modernity" in the Place Mohammed V in Central Casablanca to condemn recent terrorist incidents in the city. The demonstrators sought to advance their vision of Morocco as a modern, tolerant, and cross-cultural society. A number of other political parties and civil society groups participated. The gathering was staged by some those who organized the "Ne Touchez Pas Mon Pays" ("Don't touch my country") movement that emerged in reaction to the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, though the April 18 event was much more modest in scale.

Warden Message - Too Far (?)

18. (C) Karim Halim (protect), office director equivalent for counterterrorism at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, complained to poloff on April 18 that the U.S. warden message issued after the April 10 suicide bombings near the U.S. Consulate and American Language Center, had "gone too far" and "sent the wrong message." Halim asserted that the situation was not like Algeria, where well organized terrorists were carrying out dangerously effective attacks. By contrast, the recent acts in Morocco had been "acts of desperation" by amateurish terror groups relentlessly hunted by the GOM. Halim lamented that the cancellation and curtailment of USG activities in Morocco (e.g. the National War College delegation that was to have arrived on April 11) suggested a lack of confidence in GOM security services and exaggerated the threat. Poloff responded that the USG had considerable confidence in the GOM and appreciation for their efforts, but that the USG also had credible concerns about the potential for more attacks and a legal responsibility to share its assessments of the threat with the public.

19. (SBU) Criticism of USG statements was much sharper among some commentators in the Moroccan media. Writing in the sensationalist Arabic daily "Al-Massae," columnist Rashid Niny assailed the "hypocrisy" of USG expressions of concern for Moroccan victims even as "the U.S. occupying army causing the suffering of women and children in Iraq." More outlandish were the claims of anti-U.S. activist Khaled Sofyani, who interpreted in an interview with the Islamist daily "Attajdid" the U.S. warden message as laying the groundwork for a "U.S. intelligence plot" to sow chaos across North Africa.

Comment

110. (C) We thought significant Benabdellah's insistence that detainees' human rights would be respected. This comment, combined with the more focused investigation in place of the mass arrests that characterized the GOM's reaction to the 2003 bombings, suggests to us that the message from human rights activists and other critics may be starting to register with the government, now apparently seeking a more "surgical" response to terror. End comment.

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RABAT 00000701 003 OF 003

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